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Senator to research I-10 funding disparities

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The inability to reimburse Avondale and Goodyear for money they will front to speed up the widening of Interstate 10 is "an interesting interpretation" of a law enacted last year to help with such projects, state Sen. Robert Blendu said.

"East Valley cities have been getting reimbursed all along, so it's suspect that it's suddenly not allowed," said Blendu, R-District 12.

The senator, who lives in Litchfield Park, said he will take up the issue in budget negotiations later in the current session of the state Legislature.

In the meantime, Blendu is a primary sponsor of House Bill 2562, which would push out bonding for transportation projects to 30 years instead of 20 years.

"This bill is designed to spread that interest over a longer period of time, which seems reasonable for capital projects like this," Blendu said. "There's nothing magical about 20 years; it was just a number that transportation planners came up with."

Although the measure doesn't include any language addressing what some Southwest Valley leaders saw as an unintended "catch" in a bill last year, Blendu said he will tackle the issue once the Legislature gets down to budget negotiations.

"It's all going to happen in the budget anyway," Blendu said as far as any provision in addressing the uses and limitations of so-called "STAN funds."

STAN stands for Statewide Transportation Acceleration Needs. The measure, signed into law in 2006, designated some \$300 million to speed up several transportation projects.

One of those projects is the \$47 million expansion of I-10 from two lanes to three lanes in each direction between Verrado Way and Sarival Road in Buckeye.

That expansion wasn't on transportation planners' agenda until 2023 but now will be started in 2009.

Meanwhile, Avondale, Goodyear and Litchfield Park signed an intergovernmental agreement last year to widen I-10 in Avondale and Goodyear from two lanes to three lanes between Dysart Road and Loop 303 beginning this year. Litchfield Park has no frontage along I-10 but does lie just north of parts of Avondale and Goodyear that do.

The three cities couldn't qualify for STAN funding because the bond interest on the improvements they agreed to pay counted as funding for the project, in the eyes of transportation planners.

The Buckeye segment was funded under STAN because no funding had yet been appropriated for the project, officials said.

"I intend to get that inequity fixed just as soon as possible," Blendu said. He noted that funding likely will be available assuming a measure promoted by Sen. Bob Burns, R-District 9, is passed.

Burns proposes to take \$450 million out of the state's Budget Stabilization Fund, otherwise known as the rainy-day fund, to accelerate transportation projects.

That proposal has drawn some controversy because the fund originally was created to help the state continue essential services during economic downturns. Burns, who was the author of the rainy-day fund bill in the 1990s, said the state's economy will be dampened without a boost in funding to transportation.

Daniel Burnette can be reached by e-mail at dburnette@westvalleyview.com.

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